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[163] Chapter 5

Care of the Body

Hygiene. -- Soap making. -- Ngula and mpembe. -- Artificial deformations. -- Depilation. -- Filing the teeth. -- Hairdos. -- Ornaments and objects suspended from the body. -- Tattooing by incision. -- Circumcision [Ed., the author does not discuss circumcision in this volume].

515 356 A person who has only limited contact with the natives tends to depict them as very careless in their grooming, ignorant of the principles of hygiene and cleanliness, and, we may say, even as foul and filthy. If, however, one has an opportunity for closer contact with these primitives, he quickly realizes the inaccuracy of these judgments which are based on hasty and superficial observation. In closely studying the native's customs, in watching him in his daily, ordinary life, one notices many small things which show us [164] that the native, apparently heedless of all hygienic measures and inattentive to cleanliness, does take into account rudimentary principles of hygiene and tries to apply them in many small ways.

356 At first glance the native hut looks like a miserable hovel. Its often dilapidated appearance, narrow and low entrance, lack of windows or ventilating shaft, the general disorder reigning in the area which is used as shelter, kitchen, etc., all are reasons for the unpleasant impression acquired from a rapid investigation. The native, however, puts a great deal of care into the construction of his dwelling. The woman works hard at cleaning the inside of her hut regularly. If, pushing our investigation further, we proceed to the area reserved for the husband and wife and closely study the organization and arrangement of what serves as the bedroom, we see that a cleanliness reigns here that stands in conspicuous contrast to the unpleasant first impression. The

356 walls are lined with mats, and the crude bed is raised off the ground to avoid unpleasant and unhealthy contact with the ground. A mat is spread over the native's bed, [165] and the pillow which is customarily used permits him to lie in a restful position.

515 The natives take a bath almost every day. They usually go to the river during the hottest hours of the day, but sometimes they do so early in the morning or in the evening. The child participates in this from an early age. Aside from these regular baths, the native often washes his whole body with warm water. [302] He then smears himself with a light film of palm oil to ensure the suppleness of the skin and to protect it from the sun's rays.

264 575 Before and after each meal the native makes a point of washing out his mouth. After the meal he brushes his teeth with a small brush made of rattan or soft wood, the fibers acting as

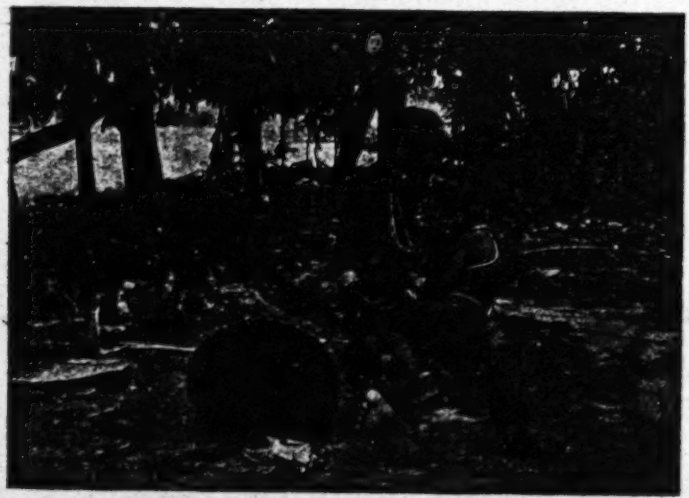

Fig. 91. A Scene from Native Life among the Riparian People of the Lower Lukenie.

bristles.

25 264 Meals are prepared with a genuine concern for cleanliness. All the food is washed, cleaned, and boiled before being eaten. Kitchen utensils are cleaned and carefully put away. Despite the primitive conditions for preparing manioc flour, the product is as pure as if it had been prepared by an improved method